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Workshop 1:

Polarization, inequality and affordable housing.

Title:

“Strategic Architecture: Appropriation and mediation processes for social infrastructures: Torre David and Casa Familiar cases”

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Abstract:

The history of modern urban planning has revealed consequences of segregation, inequality, destruction of the public realm, social exclusion and which have drawn new urban borders and have fostered the proliferation of so-called “fourth worlds”, especially in Latin America. These informal settlements that coexist spatially with the first worlds of developing countries apply increasing pressure inside cities themselves and constantly redefine complex, contested territories. The paper introduces two cases denominated “Collectors”, not to compare them, but to explore transferable and valuable urban conditions due to their interest of being between a formal / informal status. Firstly, the Teddy Cruz’s project Casa Familiar in San Ysidro, San Diego, where a complex mediation process is proposed to generate diversity and social sustainability in a marginalized neighborhood. Secondly, the Centro Financiero Cofinanzas in Caracas, a 45-story complex of 111,000 m² known as the Torre David; Before the forcible eviction in July 2014, this unfinished symbol of financial monopolies was appropriated and reconverted by its dwellers into a complex, alternative piece of the city in just seven years. In both cases, the concepts of infrastructure and architecture were intelligently blurred, leading to the transformation of an urban, social millstone. Are there real values on them that could be incorporated into the urban design process? The purpose of this paper is to uncover useful clues, to redefine social infrastructure as an open-ended system, to respond to the speed, complexity and diversity of the contemporary city’s local urban processes.

Keywords:

Segregation, appropriation, mediation processes, density, areas of identity, open-ended systems, spatial production.

Introduction: the informal.

Understanding what we are referring to by “informal” is not an easy task. We can turn to official data to get an idea; for example, according to UN-Habitat estimates there are 863 million people living today in informal settlements on the edges of our cities, representing over a third of the world’s urban population. Or: in 2050 this population is estimated to reach 2 billion people. In spite of the staggering nature of these figures, this is insufficient. We can allude to their unofficial or illegal status, their lack of planning, but that perspective, on its own, is not enough. We also know about their conditions of inequality, lack of visibility, criminality, etc.... something that blurs and devalues the complexity and diversity of these settlements, on the one hand; and stigmatizes them, creating a serious civic identity problem, on the other.



Figure 1. Two realities: On the left, the official plan of Caracas showing an enormous white area that is apparently undefined, labeled a “Green Zone”. On the right, the same plan with an aerial photo superimposed showing the real situation, the accumulation of self-constructed homes of a *Barrio* (informal settlement) of Caracas. Source: Urban-Think Tank Chair archive, ETH Zürich

Context

In spite of their vast expanse, until very recently informal areas were invisible to urban planning or were pending demolition (fig. 1). However, beyond their basic infrastructure needs, the coexistence of these *fourth worlds* with the formal cities of the first world obliges us to resolve their point of contact, to attempt to dilute new borders driven by the power of global economies, as a method for simplification and exclusion, and displaced into the heart of the city. These borders create forms of urban inequality that destroy the city’s social and spatial production processes in the long term, establishing so-called *geographies of centrality and marginality* [1].

In the Latin American context, these geographies were manifested in the region on a massive scale through the application of modern city models agreed upon in the CIAMs (International Congresses of Modern Architecture, from 1928 to 1959). In her critique of this Modern city, Jane Jacobs defined it as the *statistical city* [2], a city where a formula with which to construct urban complexity was produced based on tedious economic and statistical analyses and megalomaniacal proposals (fig. 2). Those models, based on economic and industrial macro-operations such as oil fields or mineral deposits, promised a certain amount of prosperity and caused people to move en masse from rural or degraded areas. But these people would never be admitted into the city’s urban processes, because informality is not a transitional state [3] between

poverty and a fairly prosperous future, and constant displacements represent a fundamental problem with regard to identity [4] and citizenry (figs. 2, 3).



Figure 2. Plan Voisin for Paris, Le Corbusier in 1925 (source: foundationlecorbusier.fr). Figure 3. Border between the *favela* of Paraisópolis and the wealthy neighborhood of Morumbi (photo: Tuca Vieira). Under the principles of modern urban planning applied in our cities in an increasingly distorted way, the fact that complexity and identity are also built by integrating the diverse everyday and productive processes of their inhabitants continues to be ignored. In its place, an exclusion-based urban planning is often applied that engenders violent clashes and consolidates the urban condition of sterility.

The superposition of all these processes defines urban multiplicities of space that decentralize the city and that undoubtedly undermine traditional urban planning capacity. However, they represent an extremely rich field for rethinking the creation of the urban by means of “*collector-type discreet spatial potencies, prepared for the perception or not of meeting and communication opportunities by the citizen*” [5]; a strategic architecture. The goal is not to confront the following cases presented here as **collectors** (Sloterdijk), which are only a part of a larger investigation, nor detail every part of the projects. They are not constructed, whether being a work in progress or because they have already been dismantled. But through their ambiguous status between the formal and the informal, the idea is to examine these architectural strategies in order to raise some fundamental and transferrable urban questions.

COLLECTOR 1. Casa Familiar: Living rooms at the border and senior housing with childcare. Estudio Teddy Cruz. San Ysidro-San Diego. (2001-present)

Neighborhood initiative: Mediation and Patterns.

San Ysidro exists among enormous active infrastructures and along the most transited national border in the world. Here, although the urban fabric does not take the form of an informal city *per se*, its marginal status, degree of stigmatization and socioeconomic dynamics make it function as such, and this makes it extremely interesting as a reinterpretation for the contemporary city (fig. 4).

However, other parallel urban processes and alternative behavior patterns sustain the neighborhood’s daily life, and this was a starting point. The collaboration of the NGO Casa Familiar, established there since 1968, was critical to the project.

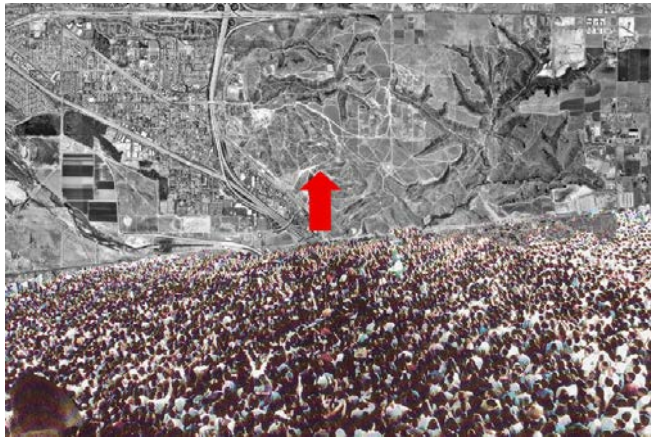


Figure 4. Photomontage showing the migratory stress and discrimination at the border between Mexico and USA, in the Tijuana area. San Ysidro's condition as a neighborhood made up mostly of immigrants from south of the border, their income about 60% less than that of the rest of San Diego county, and the discrimination of planning that turns its back on them as a social and productive fabric, among other factors, have unjustly stigmatized this part of the city. Image: Estudio Teddy Cruz

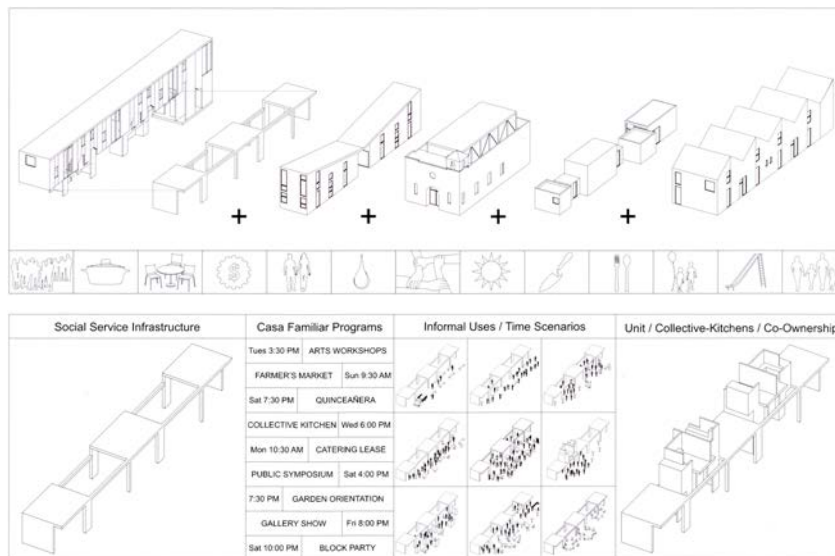
They helped to map the context, and diverse **social, political and economic mediation processes** were elaborated with them (fig. 5). These processes did not attempt to revive the tired discourse of the so-called *bottom-up* approach. Rather, in Cruz's words [6], the basis of inclusive urban planning implies two main things: One, we must invest in **urban pedagogy** (the transfer of knowledge and experience between different governments and citizens), and two, to seek **civic culture and social justice**. In brief, establishing new relationships between *top-down* and *bottom-up* strategies in which all agents benefit; in David Harvey's words, learning to be citizens by making a city.



Figure 5. Structure and development of a new micro-policy as a mediation process between agents. Summary of top-down and bottom-up strategies as diversity generators. Image: Estudio Teddy Cruz

There is clearly a **heterotopical concept** (Foucault) in the urban analysis and project, where the definition and re-definition of spaces cannot be separated from the network of relationships among people. For Teddy Cruz, density is defined above all through the social exchanges per square meter, and not by the mere accumulation of persons. By valuing the user's experience, we find something of Christopher Alexander's

“*patterns*” in the proposal; for Alexander the important element was the **relationship among objects**, not the objects themselves. We also find N. John Habraken’s “*supports*” in the organization of **incomplete, flexible and modifiable fringes** with modular systems. But in San Ysidro there is a twist, and perhaps that’s why it represents a process that is transferrable to other contexts. Each programmatic need is not seen as an autonomous unit or configured randomly by the user; rather, starting from the general organizational structure, certain conditions of economic accessibility, collectivity, intergenerational dependence and productive capacity are established, orchestrated by the NGO and continued over time. They have clear objectives: **social sustainability and generation of diversity** (figs. 6, 7).



Figures 6 and 7. Models included in *Living rooms at the Border* and different possibilities over time. Image: Estudio Teddy Cruz

COLLECTOR 2. Torre David. Anonymous community. (2007-2014).

Spontaneous initiative: Appropriation and open-ended system.

The failed history of modern urban planning has favored the dissemination of urban landmarks by the large cities and megacities as a method, such as that of the Cofinanzas Financial Center in Caracas, better known as the Torre David. It is an immense and abandoned symbol of economic policies of exclusion located in the heart of the city (fig. 8). Before its occupants were evicted in 2014 [7], in only seven years a broad group of families took possession of the whole and reconverted it into a complex, alternative chunk of city, where the concepts of infrastructure and architecture were intelligently blurred.

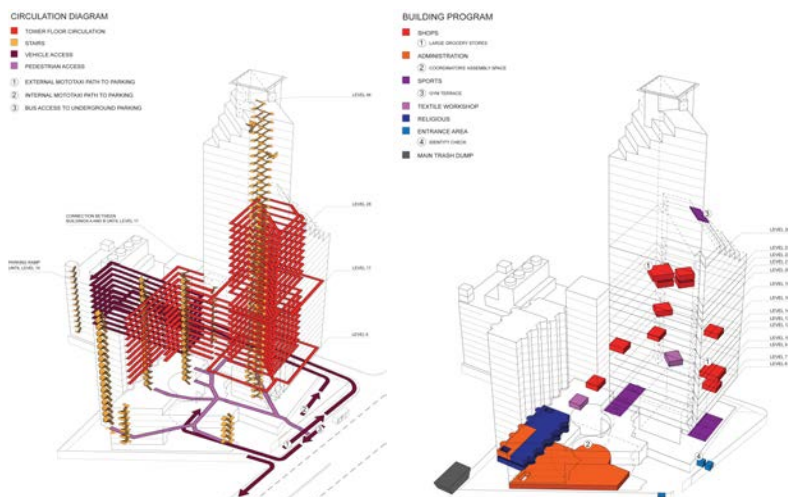
A good amount has been written about the process and now is not the time to re-explain it all [8]. However, out of the various topics there is one that is worth emphasizing here. In the case of the Torre David, somehow an empty piece of the formal city was *made informal*—perhaps the piece farthest from the informal city, any way you look at it. By **informalizing the formal**, and this is the point, Torre David could be an example of how to blur from within those internal urban borders mentioned before.



Figure 8. Aerial image of Caracas with the Cofinanzas Financial Center (Torre David) in red. Photomontage on a photo by Daniel Schwartz, 2011. UTT_ETH Zurich archive.

This case poses the question, on the one hand, of how to make both processes existing within one vertical entity converge; and on the other, how to synthesize this process and apply it to the contemporary city (figs. 9, 10).

To this end, perhaps it would help to understand this as an urban condition that Ignasi de Solà-Morales defined as “*terrain vague*” [9], basing himself on the *codification* of plateaus proposed by Deleuze. To assume that it is just as important to discover opportunities in *hypo-codified places* that are semantically generous [10], as to be capable of maintaining that same condition of a vacuum or ongoing absence over time. This focus also brings about the encounter between two opposing physical conditions, permanence and obsolescence, and questions a concept of beauty where there are no final pictures of an object, but rather **images in progress within an open-ended system** (fig. 11).



Figures 9 and 10. Circulation Diagrams and Program in the complex, courtesy of Urban-Think Tank Chair of Architecture and Urban Design (2012)



Figure 11. The tower occupied. D. Schwartz.

In short, the example of the Torre David revives the old debate about the city understood as a complex and necessarily incomplete system [11]. A system understood as a basic tool to reinforce the identity of the citizen, who needs to **become visible** and find the framework necessary to undertake his or her life projects.

This is a point where new negotiations and policies can arise [12], to undo the sentence represented by “*the tragic intimacy of proximity without sociability*” [13], as indicated by Merrifield; presence without representation.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS.

To understand the informal city as a phenomenon, we must assume that in the end it is a complex and organizational urban logic in constant adaptation to economic, social, spatial, political and violent processes. Crisis is, in essence, the permanent state of informal settlements. Not only because urban space is occupied outside that established institutionally, but because of the constant negotiation of the urban, economic and social environment. While formality assigns value, informality negotiates it [14].

Political and institutional will is fundamental for reinforcing diversity, identity and social inclusion. But the challenge lies in generating a good relationship between Top-down and Bottom-up dynamics that can make the urban project a tool for analysis and ongoing negotiation at the same time.

Transdisciplinarity is postulated as a methodological tool to reinforce civic identity and eradicate professional monopolies in contemporary cities. Some strategies, such as those presented here, no longer make the city an *imposed place* where everything can be quantified with vertical, simplistic, closed and exclusive hierarchical models, but rather a *condition*, where everything can be qualified through transversal *heterarchical processes* [15] that are more complex, open and inclusive.

That which is informal also speaks of the value of the vernacular, not understood as a final picture of civic expression, nor as an aesthetic nostalgia. It does so as a way to proceed and rethink the architecture project itself where the social impact of architecture would be assessed by what it performs, not by its appearance. A way of also committing to social strategies, powerful devices, adaptable tactics, flexible prototypes and direct languages. There are no final pictures; rather, there are images in progress, reflections of the urban dynamic that we cannot capture and freeze directly, but from which we must learn.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Sassen, S., 2007. *A sociology of globalization*. New York: Norton & Company Ltd. Spanish Version, 2012. *Una Sociología de la globalización*. Madrid: Katz Editores. p. 126

[2] Jacobs, J., 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Ed. Random House Spanish versión, 2011. *Muerte y vida de las Grandes Ciudades*. Madrid: Ed Capitán Swing Libros, S.L. p.477

[3] Florida, R., 2014. The Amazing endurance of Slums.
On-line source: <http://www.citylab.com/work/2014/01/amazing-endurance-slums/8120>

[4] Perlman, J., 1986. Six misconceptions about Squatter Settlements, in *Development: Seeds of change. Village through global order*. Volume 4. Pp 40-44. p. 41. In this text Perlman, a researcher who has studied the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro for more than forty years, notes with regard to the inhabitants of this informal city: "*They have the aspirations of the bourgeoisie, the perseverance of the pioneers and the values of patriots. What they do not have is an opportunity to fulfill their aspirations.*"

[5] Sloterdijk, P., 2004. *Sphären III (Plurale Sphärologie)*. Schäume. Frankfurt am Main: Ed. Suhrkamp Verlag. Spanish version, 2009. *Esferas III*. Madrid: Ed. Siruela. p. 497

[6] Cruz, T., 2011. Latin American Meander. In search of a new civic imagination, in *Architectural Design*, Vol. 81, nº 3 *Latin America at the crossroads*. May-June 2011. Ed. John Wiley & Sons. Pp:110-117. p.111

[7] The express eviction of the tower, in July of 2014, was once again motivated by powerful foreign investments, from China on this occasion, that wanted to return the complex's use to something very similar to the original. In other words, macroeconomic history repeats itself, and another 1200 families were thrown out and displaced.

[8] Brillembourg, A. and Klumpner, H., 2013. *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities*. Zürich: Ed. Lars Müller Publishers. This book exhaustively documents both the process and the designs.

[9] Solà-Morales, I., 1995. *Terrain Vague. Anyplace, anyone*. NY Cambridge (Mass): Corp./ MIT Press, pp.118-123. Reprinted in spanish: 2002, *Territorios*, Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.

[10] Boeri, S., 2003. Atlanti eclettici. In *Multiplicity* (Ed.), *USE: Uncertain States of Europe*. Milán: Skira,. pp. 428-445

[11] Sennet, R., 2006. The open city. In *Urban Age, Newspaper "Towards an urban age"*, Urban Age Summit, Berlin: Ed. London School of Economics and Political Science. November 2006. On-line source: http://issuu.com/lsecities/docs/ua_summit_berlin_newspaper

[12] Sassen, S., 2013. Economía y ciudad. *Forbes life*, 09/13. p.72-77. p.77

[13] Merrifield, A., 2011. The Right to the City and Beyond: notes on a Lefebvrian re-conceptualization. In *Urban, "Espectros de Lefebvre"* NS02, Septiembre 2011-Febrero 2012. Madrid: Ed. DUyOT- ETSAM. Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. Pp. 101-110.p.103

[14] Roy, A. and Alsayyad, N. Ed, 2003. *Urban Informality. Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America and South Asia*. Oxford: Ed. Lexington Books. p.5

[15] Abel, C., 2000. Asian Urban Futures.
On-line source: http://ctbuh.org/Portals/0/Repository/Abel_2000_AsianUrbanFutures.eff63b49-b98c-4721-b3aa-0e5bc84580d3.pdf. p.233

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